

# California Southern Baptists create competing state convention

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THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. (ABP)—Southern Baptists in California have started a new alternative state convention that will compete with the 67-year-old California Southern Baptist Convention for denominational loyalty.

California is the fourth state to witness such a move, joining Texas, Missouri and Virginia. In those states, alternative Baptist conventions have resulted in competition with the established conventions for contributions and membership.

Ron Wilson, a Los Angeles-area pastor, said he helped create the California Baptist Conservative Coalition as a way to organize California Baptists who are discontent with the way the traditional state convention divides up its money and the way the national Southern Baptist Convention counts church contributions.

Wilson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Thousand Oaks, Calif., has been a

trustee of several SBC national agencies, including the North American Mission Board currently, which all would receive more support under the new structure.

“We’ve got three things we’re going to do,” Wilson said. “We’re going with a 50-50 split (of contributions) with the national convention and the (new) state convention. Our statement of faith will be the Baptist Faith & Message. And we are going to meet three times a year.”

The “50-50 split,” which evenly divides the offerings of coalition churches between the SBC’s national Cooperative Program and the new state convention. Wilson said the purpose of the new group is to give more to the national SBC in order “to have more money spent on actual missions.”

The current division of funds in the traditional California State Baptist Convention is 28 percent for SBC and 72 percent for the state convention’s own ministries, much of it spent to start and assist California Baptist churches.

Wilson said his church currently gives 25 percent of its receipts to the state convention and 75 percent to the national convention. With the new convention, his church plans to give 50 percent to the new group and 50 percent to the national Cooperative Program. That will allow members to manage more closely which missions to support, he said.

SBC leaders have worked in recent years to revive Cooperative Program giving, which funds the convention’s mission boards and other agencies. But those efforts have been hindered, some say, by state conventions that keep a large percentage of church donations for in-state mission work.

Since fundamentalists won control of the national SBC in the 1980s, they have reshaped the SBC’s ministries and agencies more to their liking. But they have not gained similar control in all of the traditional state conventions, leading some to form alternative groups.

If the Southern Baptist Convention officially recognizes the upstart California convention—as it has the breakaway conventions in Texas and Virginia—all the money sent from the new convention to the SBC will be counted as Cooperative Program giving. Currently a church like Wilson's, which bypasses the traditional state convention and its 28-72 split, usually does not get credit for supporting the Cooperative Program.

Pastors like Wilson and Wiley Drake, well-known radio-show host from First Southern Baptist Church in Buena Park, Calif., think they should get credit for the money given to state conventions—and they say no one at the national level has listened to their request.

“We feel like we've been sort of disenfranchised,” said Drake, last year's SBC second vice president. “We just have felt like we haven't been heard.”

Drake said the new convention's 50-50 split of donations is a key attraction for his church, especially because of the small church's limited budget. “This (new coalition) is something that has been going on for a long time. We've had this thing going all along, but it wasn't organized.”

Wilson said non-profit status for the new group has already been processed and approved by the U.S. government.

Leaders at the tradition California Southern Baptist Convention, however, said they had not received any formal word about the new group.

Terry Barone, editor of the *California Southern Baptist* newspaper and director of the traditional state convention's communications division, said he heard Wilson announce on the floor of the recent SBC annual meeting the plans for the new convention, but he hasn't “received any information regarding what was said.”

“The local church is autonomous,” Barone said. “We think Ron (Wilson) has a perfect right to do this if this is what he wishes to do. That's one of the

jewels of being a Baptist—that we have the autonomy to do what we think is best from the standpoint of a local church, state association or national convention.”

The theme of the newly minted coalition is “a new way, a new day.” Wilson said he plans to pattern the group after the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention. The nine-year-old Texas group, largest of the four, counts 1,800 churches as members and has an annual budget of \$9 million.

So far, there is little detail on how the new California convention would spend the money it receives.

“We’re really going to be between an association and a state convention. An association not determined by geography, but we want to do church starts,” Wilson said.

The group will start out as a loose coalition that focuses on mission work and fellowship, Drake said. He declined to name churches considering membership and said he hasn’t yet decided whether to ask his church to vote to join.

Wilson said he expects between 75 and 100 churches to be affiliated with the coalition by the end of its first year, with the potential to eventually incorporate up to 400 churches. Members won’t have to be present to vote on convention business, and “natural leaders” will emerge, rather than be elected. The first person hired to staff the group will be a secretary, Wilson said.

The California Southern Baptist Convention has 1,800 member congregations.

“We’ve been thinking about doing this since 1994,” Wilson said. “There was a group that wanted to do it then. Looking back, I think we should have done it then. Unfortunately I spooked and said, ‘Let’s wait and see how

things develop.' We are going to do it now, and we'll just see what people will do."

Still, Drake stressed that his church does not want to leave the California Southern Baptist Convention. If the existing state convention suddenly "sees the mission opportunity for the 50-50 split," his church would rethink joining the new coalition, he said.

There is no reason why the two competing conventions can't co-exist, he said.

"I have a good relationship with the state convention," Drake said. "I'm not ready to throw in the towel, so to speak. At least from my perspective, I would still want to be connected with the California Southern Baptist Convention."

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